Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Book: 23

Kiss me Here

Part- 1

I - Karly Make $10;000 a week just making cummie on cam! Other jobs can go suck it! That is $400 a day, and like 3 shows- so about 5 times making cummie!!

Part- 2

Here are the facts.

- When you look bored; you are much less likely to make any money because your guests will get bored along with you.

- With the proper equipment, training, and attitude - a new model does

have the potential to start off making anywhere from $20 - $40 per hour.

- I read all the tips I could find before I started, and I did my best to have a good setup. During my first week on cam; I was shy and awkward - and I averaged about $13 per hour.

- The better looking; she is; the easier it will be starting.

- In the long run; though; a great personality is much more important to the longevity of her career as a webcam model.

- The more a camgirl is willing to do on cam; the higher her earning potential will be.

- If she’s not willing to do some X-rated performances; she will have a harder time starting. That does not mean it’s impossible; as of course there are fetishes and niches out there that are in high demand as well. It’s just a matter of finding her audience.

- Consistent earnings come from sticking to a consistent schedule and working toward developing a solid fan base.

Tip #1

New Model Status- Take Advantage of Extra Promotion

The promotion period varies from site to site; so, pay attention when you're setting up your account.

Streamate - 30 days

Chaturbate - 7 days

These examples are current while I'm writing this, but you should always cross-reference in case they become outdated.

The key to your success as a webcam model is your fan base. These are the top 5 tips to help you develop your

solid foundation of loyal customers. Follow these from the start, and you'll be setting yourself up for long-term success.

Tip #2

Treat Camming Like the Job it is- Consistency is Key Repeat customers become repeat customers because they know when you're open for business.

Imagine you're the customer for a sec. You're hooked on this awesome cam girl and she tells you she's going to be online at a certain time; so, you go to meet her in her chat room. But she doesn't show up. Think you'll be inclined to keep coming back?

Treat your customers like you would in any business, and be reliable with your schedule.

Your consistent schedule will lead to your consistent fan base.

Tip #3

Tweet; Tweet; Tweet!

Twitter-

Second to keeping your consistent schedule is to keep up with Twitter. Get your fans following you so you can keep them updated on what sites you're using and what shows you're planning.

If you decide to try a new site; for example; your fan base will follow you there. Many cam sites do not allow mentioning other cam sites or outside contact information; so, Twitter serves as a platform where you are free to market yourself wherever you may be and keep in touch with your loyal customers.

Get repeat boys and you have them giving you loads- in more ways than one! It’s nice to have boys love you! When you’re not all that loved or love yourself. And doing this I don’t feel that way. This is safe- and I do not fuck some dick- that is going to be a dick to me the next or break my heart… see!

More on Twitter.

Tip #4

Money happens more when you don’t think about it.

If you act like you’re just there for the money; you’re going to lose potential clients. Your guests want to believe that you WANT to be online hanging with them. Sure; at the back of their minds they know you’re working for an income, but that’s not what they need to be focused on.

Chill out; enjoy getting to know your guests and learning to rock your cam. Get your fans’ focus away from their

wallets and they’re more likely to open their wallets for you.

Get your fans’ focus away from their wallets and they’re more likely to open their wallets.

Tweet This.

Tip #5

Turn Up Personality; Be Assertive, and Be Ready for Anything-

Remember your personality is the ultimate factor to whether you’re going to gain a loyal following. Let yourself shine. Let them see you. Trust me; your quality fans will love you.

Know your boundaries and be ready to experiment within your boundaries. Customers love a camgirl willing to try new things within her limits. Eventually; you may even push those limits, but don’t rush that process. Stay true to yourself and your personality, and your best fans will keep coming back for more.

Stay true to yourself and your personality, and your best fans will keep coming back for more.

- The ads report the earnings of the site’s best models and usually to state ‘up to’ - like how your Internet Service

Provider says; ‘up to,’ the download/upload speeds you pay for lol.

- When you try too hard; you are much less likely to make any money because you look desperate.

- When you engage your visitors; keep a positive attitude and just be yourself on cam; you are much more likely to make money because your guests are more likely to find you entertaining and likable.

- I’m about 5 years into this job. On my best days; I can make $100 in an hour. On worse to average days; I can see anything from $20 - $50 per hour. Hell;

this is better than $2.50 at an eating hole-serving A-holes- where I get nothing- and the same gets it all!

- When they make those claims of weekly earnings or even sometimes monthly or yearly earnings; this is dependent on the model's stamina and how much time she wants to put into this.

- Sure; I could make $100;000 in a year; if I worked 40-hour weeks; but I work less than 10 hours most weeks because it's better for my health and overall sense of well-being.

- It makes me feel good in all ways too- about me…

- The longer you stay logged on; the better your chances are of actually making money.

- Don’t base your hourly wage off of logging on for one hour and then logging off. It’s average, and traffic comes and goes so it’s best to try and be around when your guests are around.

- I’d be willing to wager that every model in the history of webcam modeling has gone through a shift and earned zero dollars. This is unlikely… boys love to see girls make cummie!

Someone said to me- like- that I am a lazy girl- that people who want what I

am are just abusing the system… if you say so… I do it for its fun and I make more than you do your shitty job so…

Eat me- ha- OUT!

Like it better than having some boss thinking he knows more than I do… I make my time… also; there are no mean girls I have to work for or with… remember there is a lot of sucks out there with others… the real world is an ass… I am queen bee! And they all just lllooovvveee me!

‘BE NICE OR YOU’LL BE BANNED!’

Part- 3

A text message from Jenny here sitting out the pot- ‘There is nothing like the sweet pitter-patter of piss.’

Right on- I said back it just feels good to let it all out in three pushes!

Mumm hum…

THURSDAY;

AUGUST 25

Marcel,

THE DAY OF JOUST WAS WET AND VERY COLD. Marcel dressed in his favorite jeans and a worn T-shirt; emerged

sockless into the den; ate cereal from a mixing bowl, and watched a few reality TV shows with Dayna; then making some jokes about the douchebags who would let their whole lives get filmed. He seemed relieved that he was acting somewhat normal.

Nevertheless, the whole time; his mind was several miles away; on a dark straightaway; on engines gunning and tires screeching and the smell of smoke. He was worried.

Worried the fire would start too early when Marcel was driving the car. Likewise, ever-so worried that Ray wouldn’t go for the switch. He was

counting on that; he had rehearsed a speech in his head.

‘I want to change cars like now;’ he’d say after Maggie let him win the first round. ‘So, I know it’s fair... and so, like I know he didn’t go turbo on his engine, or screwed around with my brakes and all.’

How could Ray say no... to this?

If Marcel drove carefully; no more than forty miles per hour; the engine shouldn’t heat up too much, and the explosion wouldn’t get triggered.

Maggie had to let him win even if she was going at a crawl. Ray would never suspect.

And then she'd get in the car; floor it, and the engine would start smoking and sparking- and even flaming and then - Revenge.

If everything went according to plan. If- if- if, Maggie hated that stupid word.

At three p.m. Kelly Bill came by to take Dayna to physical therapy. Yet Maggie thought she needed it more than this girl who was getting it for free.

Marcel didn't understand or get, like how Kelly had just wormed his way into their lives.

Dayna was practically up to his ass all day- breathing off of his farts.

Like they were suddenly all one big happy family unit in all; nonetheless, Marcel was the only one who could remember anything at all they weren't family; would never be one. It had always been Marcel and Dayna and no one else, from a turning point in time- of their lives.

-And-

Now; he'd even lost her, to his ways- of how he is and all.

'You going to be okay?' She asked, confused.

She was getting good with her chair; spinning herself around furniture dumbly; bumping up the place where the floor was slightly uneven, just to be childlike and annoying. hated that she'd had to get good at being crippled.

'Yeah; sure,' it was so deliberately don't, so- we all didn't even look at her.

'Just going to watch some TV and stuff like that.'

‘Okay have fun playing with yourself...’ she said.

‘We’ll be back in a couple of hours,'' she said. And then at that moment at that time and place- ‘I think it’s working; Marcel.’

‘I’m happy for you;’ he said. He was surprised and alarmed to feel his throat getting so-o tight. She was halfway out the door when he called her back. ‘Dayna;’ he said. All for you...

She turned. ‘What?’

He managed to smile. ‘Love yah, always- You and I always- that's what we make.’

‘Don’t be such a dick then from now on- and I/we agree;’ she said and smiled back.

Then she wheeled out of the house and closed the door behind her, sighing- in happiness.

Maggie WITH EVERY PASSING MINUTE; SHE WAS CLOSER TO THE END.

Maggie should have felt a sense of relief and letting go of a feeling of

tenseness, but instead; she was gripped; all day; with dread.

She told herself that all she had to do was lose. She would have to trust that Marcel would keep his promise about the money- and love and everything that he was not holding up to in the past- and if he had changed.

He wasn’t playing for the money. She had always known that on some level. Nevertheless, she wished she’d pushed him about what motivated him some.

Maybe that was making her jumpy- now; even at the very end of the game; she didn’t understand his end goal.

It made her feel as though other games were going on; secret rules and pacts and alliances being made, and she was just a pawn.

...Around five o'clock; the storm passed, and the clouds started to shred apart.

The air was so thick with moisture and mosquitoes, and all the roads would be slick and wet.

Baring in mind she reminded herself it wouldn't matter at all.

She could back out; even; if she wanted to; pretend to flake out, or pussy out; at the last second.

Then Marcel and Ray could face off and she'd be done. Still; the sick feeling a weight in her stomach; an itch under her skin- wouldn't leave her.

Just had been moved. There had been no formal messages about it; no texts or emails, or even Facebook.

Joh- John was lying low and being mysterious... just in case anyone was angry about the way the game had shaken out.

Maggie didn’t blame him, at all for this- and presumably Vivian; too; was keeping her head down.

For the first time in the history of the game; the final challenge would proceed with or without the judges.

...Apart from word had come back to Maggie; as it always did in a town so small; with so little but talk to feed it.

The officers and cops were all posted all around the runway where Joust traditionally occurred.

So- a change in location, a spot not far from the gully and the old train tracks.

Maggie wondered; with another pang; whether Nat would show up.

It was six o’clock when she left, her hands were already shaking, and she worried that in another hour or so; she’d be too nervous to drive, or she'd flake out entirely.

Anne had agreed to let- Maggie use the car for that night, and Maggie hated herself for lying about why she needed it at all.

Likewise, she said to herself in her mind that this was it; the end no more lies from here on out.

Then she would be extra careful about everything- just like a young preteen girl, needed to feel safe and warm and content like a lost child, and pull the car off the road well before Marcel came anywhere close to her. Seeing her like this...

She didn’t say goodbye to Lily.

She didn’t want to make a big deal of it all and such.

It wasn’t a big deal- at all. This was running through her head.

She’d be home in a few hours.

She had just turned out of the driveway when she felt her I-phone- buzzing on her ass cheek.

She ignored it for the time being; but the calls started up again right away, even on vibrate.

-And-

Then a third time and even a fourth time. She ripped the battery out of the back by the fifth... and through the

phone to the floor, and the battery to the back.

She pulled over, to get all the flown parts of her phone, to see what could not weigh, Nat. As soon as she picked up; she knew something was very; very wrong.

‘Maggie; please;’ Nat was saying; even before Maggie said- hello.

‘Something really- really- bad is going to happen. We have to stop it- now.’

‘Hold on; hold on.’ Maggie could hear Nat sniffling. ‘Calm down. Start at the beginning.’

‘It’s going to happen tonight;’ Nat said as if foreseeing the future. ‘We have to do something. He’ll end up dead. Or he’ll kill Ray.’ Maggie could barely follow the thread of the conversation.

‘Who?’

‘Marcel;’ Nat wailed. ‘Please; Maggie. You have to help us.’

Maggie sucked in a deep breath hard and very fast. The sun chose that moment to break through the clouds completely with heavy rays.

The sky was streaked with fingers of red and orange; the exact color of new blood.

‘Who’s us…?’

‘Just come;’ Nat said. ‘Please. I’ll explain everything when you get here.’

Marcel; Marcel DROVE PAST THE GULLY JUST AFTER SIX O’CLOCK. The car Joh- John had lent him-a LeSabre that Marcel knew could never- ever- never- ever, ever- never- be returned- was old and temperamental, and drifted to the left whenever he didn’t correct it.

It didn’t matter at all. Marcel didn’t need it for very long.

He parked on the side of the road next to a yield sign on one side of the straightaway that had been selected for the challenge.

The road was pretty dead-maybe people were discouraged by the bad weather.

Marcel was glad about this. He couldn’t risk being spotted.

It didn’t take long at all. Like- It was surprisingly easy- kaddish stuff; which was so-o ironic; especially considering that

Marcel had failed chemistry three times, and wasn’t exactly a science guy at all.

Funny to me, how easily you could look this shit up online, and just pass without knowing or even caring- yet that is the time we live in.

Explosives; bombs; Molotov cocktails; IEDs - anything you wanted.

Learning how to blow someone up was easier than buying a frigging beer.

Earlier that day; he would link a bit of an old Styrofoam cooler in some gasoline and pour the whole mixture into a mason jar.

Homemade napalm I call it- so-o it's as easy as making dressing for a Caesar salad, now he carefully duct-taped everything with a firecracker to the outside of the mission jar and tightly packed the whole thing down into the engine compartment.

Not too close to the exhaust manifold- he needed to get through the challenge with Maggie first.

And he would drive carefully; make sure the engine didn’t get too hot.

Then the car would go to Ray.

Ray would gun it, and the firecracker would ignite, and the jar would shatter; discharging the explosives.

Kaboom and all would be done!

All he had to do now was wait. But almost immediately; he got a text from Maggie. Need to pick up.

Emergency, we have to talk about this.

And then- now, Marcel cursed out loud. Then he had a sudden fear- she was going to back out. That would ruin everything. He wrote her back quickly.

Corner of Wolf Hill and Pleasant-Valley. Pick me up.

Coming; she wrote back. He walked in circles while he waited for her; smoking cigarettes. He had been calm before, but now he has filled with anxiety; a crawling; itching sensation; as though spiders were scurrying under his skin.

He thought of Dayna in the hospital bed as he'd first seen her after the accident-wide-eyed; a little blood and snot crusted above her mouth; saying; 'I can't feel my legs. What happened to my legs?' Getting hysterical in the hospital room; trying to stand, and landing instead in

Marcel’s lap. He thought of Luke Hanrahan; driving off with fifty grand, and the night

Marcel had stood outside the Hanrahan's house with a baseball bat and been too afraid to act.

And by the time Maggie pulled up; he felt a little better.

Maggie wouldn’t tell him anything in the car. ‘What’s this about?’ he asked her. But she just kept repeating; ‘Just hold on. Okay? She’ll want to tell you herself.’ ‘She?’ His stomach flipped. ‘Nat;’ she said.

‘Is she okay?’ he asked.

Nonetheless, Maggie just shook her head, indicating she would say no more. He was getting annoyed now.

This was a bad time; he needed to focus. His stomach was tight with nerves.

Or at the same time; he was flattered that Maggie needed him- flattered; too; that Nat might have asked to see him.

Then they still had two hours before full dusk. More than enough time.

There were two cars in Nat's driveway; one of them a battered 1952 Ford truck he didn't recognize.

He wondered if this was some kind of intervention for her and got that crawling feeling under his skin again.

'What's going on here...?' He asked again and again. 'I told you;' Maggie said.

'She'll want to explain it herself.' The door was unlocked. Weirdly; although the light was rapidly fading outside; there were no lamps in the house.

The air was dull and gray like the primer on the side of the old Ford truck; lying like a textured blanket over everything; smudging out details.

Walking into Nat's house; Marcel had the feeling he used to get in the church before giving up on that too- like he was trespassing on sacred ground.

There were thick trees everywhere; lots of nice-looking furniture; things that screamed money to him. But not a sound.

'Is she even here...?' he asked. His voice sounded extremely loud.

‘Downstairs, at that moment,’ Maggie moved ahead of him.

She opened a door just to the right of the living room.

A set of unfinished stairs led down into what was a basement.

Marcel thought he heard some slight movements; maybe a whisper or footsteps; but then it stopped.

‘Go ahead;’ Maggie said. He was going to tell her to go first, but he didn’t want her to think he was afraid. Which he was; for whatever reason. Something about

this place-the silence; maybe- was freaking him out.

As if sensing his hesitation; Maggie said; ‘Look; we’ll be able to talk down there. She’ll tell you everything.’ Maggie paused. ‘Nat?’ she called out.

‘Down here!’ Nat’s voice came from the basement. Reassured; he headed down the stairs; into the musty gritty; humid; underground air.

The basement was large and filled with discarded furniture. He had just reached the bottom of the stairs and turned around to look for Nat when the

lights went off. He froze; confused and dazed.

‘What the-’ he started to say; but then he felt roughly seized; heard an explosion of voices. He thought for one second this must be part of the game; a challenge he hadn’t anticipated.

‘Over here; over here!’ Nat was saying. Marcel struck out; struggling, but whoever was holding him was big; fleshy, and strong. A guy, Marcel could tell by his size, and by the smell; too- menthol; beer; aftershave. Marcel kicked out; the guy cursed, and something toppled over. There was the sound of breaking the glass.

Natalie said; ‘Shit. Here. Here.’ Marcel was forced into a chair. His hands were twisted behind him; tied up with something. Duct tape. His legs; too.

‘What the fuck?’ He was yelling now. ‘Get the fuck off me.’

‘Sh-h-h, Marcel, It’s okay.’ Even now; here; Marcel was paralyzed by the sound of Natalie’s voice.

He couldn’t even struggle. ‘What the hell is this?’ He said. ‘What are you doing?’ His eyes were slowly adjusting to the dark. He could just make her out; the wide contours of her eyes; two sad; dark holes.

‘It’s for you;’ she said. ‘For your good.’

‘What are you talking about?’ He thought; suddenly; of the car parked on Pleasant-Valley Lane; the mason jar of gasoline and Styrofoam nestled in the engine like a secret heart. He strained against the duct tape binding him.

‘Let me go.’ It was said.

‘Marcel; listen to me.’ Nat’s voice broke, and he realized she’d been crying. ‘I know- I know you blame Luke for what happened to your sister.

For the accident; right?' Marcel felt something ice-cold move through him. He couldn't speak at all. 'I don't know exactly what you're planning, but I won't let you go through with it;' Nat said. 'This has to stop now.'

'Let me go.' His voice was rising. He was fighting a panicked feeling; a sense of dull dread in his whole body; the same feeling he'd had two years earlier; standing on the lawn in front of the Hanrahan's house; trying to get his feet to move.

'Marcel; listen to me.' Her hands were on his shoulders. He wanted to push her off, but he couldn't. And another part

of him wanted her and hated her at the same time. ‘This is for you. This is because I do care.’

‘You don’t know anything;’ he said. He could smell her skin; a combination of vanilla and bubblegum, and it made him ache. ‘Let me go; Natalie. This is insane.’ ‘No. I’m sorry, but no.’ Her fingers grazed his cheek. ‘I won’t let you do anything stupid. I don’t want you to get hurt.’

She leaned even closer until her lips were nearly touching his. He thought she might be leaning in to kiss him, and he was unable to turn away; unable to resist.

Then he felt her hands moving along his thighs; groping.

‘What are you-?’ he started to say. But just then she found his pocket and extracted his keys and phone.

‘I’m sorry;’ she said; straightening up. And she did truly sound sorry. ‘You must believe me; it’s for the best.’

A wave of helplessness overtook him completely. He made a final; futile attempt to free himself. The chair moved forward a few inches or two on the concrete floor.

‘Please;’ he said. ‘Natalie...’

‘I’m sorry; Marcel;’ Nat said. ‘I’ll be back as soon as the challenge is over; I swear.’

She was fumbling with her phone, and the screen lit up temporarily; casting her face in brightness; showing the deep; mournful hollows of her eyes; her expression of pity and regret. And lighting up; too; the guy behind her. The one who’d wrestled Marcel into the chair.

He’d gained weight at least thirty pounds-and he’d let his hair get long.

Fifty grand wasn’t sitting too well on him. But there was no mistaking his eyes; the hard set of his jaw, and the scar;

like a small white worm; cutting straight through his left eyebrow. Marcel felt a fist of shock plunge straight through him. He could no longer speak or even breathe.

Luke Hanrahan.

Maggie-

MAGGIE WAITED IN THE CAR WHILE NATALIE AND LUKE did whatever they had to do. She was trying to breathe normally, but her lungs weren't obeying and kept fluttering weirdly in her chest.

She would have to go up against Ray Hanrahan now. There was no giving in or weaseling out. She wondered what

Marcel had planned for tonight. Luke hadn't exactly known either; although he'd shown Nat and Maggie some of the threatening messages that had come from Marcel.

It was surreal; sitting in Nat's kitchen with Luke Hanrahan; football star Luke- Hanrahan; the homecoming king who'd gotten kicked out of homecoming for smoking weed in the locker room during the announcement of the court.

Winner of Fright.

Who'd once assaulted a cashier at the 7-Eleven in Happy when the guy wouldn't sell him cigarettes. He looked like

shit. Two years away from Cace hadn’t done him any good; which was shocking to Maggie. She thought all you needed to do- all all of them needed was to get out. But maybe you carried your demons with you everywhere; the way you carried your shadow.

He would have found Nat; he said; because of a betting slip that had reached him in Buffalo. And because of that stupid video the; one filmed at the water towers; which showed Marcel with his arm slung around Nat. Nat had been the easiest of the remaining players to locate, and he was hoping he could talk her into helping him convince Marcel to bow out.

Nat emerged from the house at last. Maggie watched her talking with Luke on the front porch; he was nearly double her size. It crazy how several years ago;

Nat would have freaked at the idea that Luke might ever look in her direction or know who she was. It was so strange; the way that life moved forward- the twists and the dead ends; the sudden opportunities. She supposed if you could predict or foresee everything that was going to happen; you'd lose the motivation to go through it all. The promise was always in the possibility.

‘Is Marcel okay?’ Maggie asked when Nat slid into the car.

‘He’s mad;’ Nat said.

‘You did kidnap him;’ Maggie pointed out.

‘For his good;’ Nat said, and for a minute she looked angry. But then she smiled. ‘I’ve never kidnapped someone before.’

‘Don’t make a habit of it.’ They both seemed to have resolved not to mention their fight, and Maggie was glad. She nodded at Luke, who was getting into his truck. ‘Is he coming to watch?’

Nat shook her head. ‘I don’t think so.’ She paused, and said in a low voice; ‘It’s awful; what he did to Dayna. I think he must hate himself.’ ‘He seems like he does;’ Maggie said. But she didn’t want to think about Luke; or Marcel’s sister; or legs buried beneath a ton of metal; rendered useless.

She was already sick with nerves.

‘Are you okay?’ Nat said.

‘No;’ Maggie said bluntly and belligerently.

‘You’re so close; Maggie. You’re almost at the end. You’re winning.’

‘I’m not winning yet;’ Maggie said. But she put the car into gear. There was no more delaying it. There was hardly any light left in the sky as though the horizon were a black hole; sucking all the color away. Something else occurred to her. ‘Jesus. This is Anne’s car. I’m barely allowed to be driving it. I can’t go up against Ray in this.’

‘You don’t have to.’ Nat reached into her purse and extracted a set of keys; jiggling them dramatically.

Maggie looked at her. ‘Where’d you get those?’

‘Marcel;’ Nat said. She flipped the keys into her palm and returned them to her bag. ‘You can use his car. Better to be safe than sorry; right?’ As the last of the sun vanished, and the moon; like a giant scythe; cut through the clouds; they gathered...

Quietly they materialized from the woods; they came down the gully; scattering gravel; sliding on the hill; or they came packed together in cars; driving slowly; headlights off; like submarines in the dark.

And by the time stars surfaced from the darkness; they were all there- all

the kids of Cace; come to witness the final challenge, it was time.

There was no need for -Digging to repeat the rules; everyone knew the rules of Joust. Each car aimed for the other; going fast in a single lane.

The first person to swerve would lose...

And the winner would take the pot. Maggie was so nervous; it took her three tries to get the key in the ignition.

She’d found the LeSabre pulled over on the side of the road; practically

buried in the bushes. It was Joh- John's car- Marcel must have borrowed it.

She was unreasonably annoyed that Joh- John had helped Marcel in this way. She wondered if Joh- John had risked coming tonight-somewhere in the crowd; the dark masses of people; faces indistinguishable in the weak moonlight.

She was too proud to text him and see.

Ashamed; too. He'd tried to talk to her; to explain, and she had acted awful. She wondered whether he would forgive her.

‘How are you feeling?’ Nat asked her. She’d offered to stay with Maggie until the last possible second.

‘I’m okay;’ Maggie said; which was a lie. Her lips were numb. Her tongue felt thick. How would she drive when she could barely feel her hands? As she pulled the car up to her starting position; the headlights lit clusters of faces; ghost-white; standing quietly in the shadow of the trees. The engine was whining like there was something wrong with it.

‘You’re going to be fine;’ Nat said. She twisted in her seat. Her eyes were suddenly wide; urgent. ‘You’re going to be

fine; okay?’ She said it like she was trying to convince herself. -Digging was gesturing to Maggie; indicating she should turn the car around.

The engine was making a weird grinding noise. She thought she smelled something weird too; but then thought she must be imagining it. It would all be over soon; anyway.

Thirty; forty seconds; tops. When she managed to get her car pointed in the right direction; -Digging rapped on her windshield with his fingers; gave her a short nod. At the other end of the road-a a thousand

miles-she saw the twin circles of Ray's headlights. They went on and off again. On and off. Like some kind of warning.

'You should go,' Maggie said. Her throat was tight. 'We're about to start.' 'I love you; Maggie.' Nat leaned over and put her arms around Maggie's neck. She smelled familiar and Nat-like, and it made Maggie want to cry; as though they were saying goodbye for the last time. Then Nat pulled away.

'Look; if Ray doesn't swerve- I mean; if you're close and it doesn't look like he's going to turn - You have to

promise me you will. You can’t risk a collision; okay? Promise me.’

‘I promise;’ Maggie said.

‘Good luck.’ Then Nat was gone. Maggie saw her jog to the side of the road.

And Maggie was alone in the car; in the dark; facing a long, narrow stretch of road; pointing like a finger toward the glow of distant headlights.

She thought of Lily...

She thought of Anne...

She thought of Joh- John. She thought of the tigers, and of everything she’d ever screwed up in her life.

She swore to herself that she wouldn’t be the first to swerve. While in a dark basement; with the smell of mothballs and old furniture in his nose; Marcel realized; too late; why Nat had taken his keys-and; crying out; fought against his restraints; thinking of a little time-bomb heart; ticking slowly- away…

Something in the engine was smoking. Maggie saw little trails of smoke unfurling from the hood of the car; like narrow black snakes. But just then - Digging stepped into the center of the road; shirtless; waving his T-shirt above his head like a flag.

Then it was already too late. She heard the high-pitched squeal of tires on asphalt. Ray had started to move. She slammed her foot on the accelerator and the car jumped forward; skidding a little. The smoke redoubled almost instantly; for a second her vision was completely obscured.

(Fear...)

Then it broke apart and she could see. Headlights growing bigger. The slick sheen of the moon. And smoke; pouring like liquid from the hood. Everything was fast; too fast-she was hurtling down the

road; there was nothing but two moons; growing larger

- closer-

The stink of burning rubber and the scream of tires - Closer; closer - She was hurtling forward. The speedometer ticked up to sixty miles per hour. It was too late to swerve now, and he wasn’t serving either. It was too late to do anything but crash.

Flames leaped suddenly out of the engine; a huge roar of the fire. Maggie screamed. She couldn’t see anything. The wheel jerked in her hand, and she struggled to keep her car on the road.

The air stank like burning plastic and her lungs were tight with smoke. She slammed on the brakes; suddenly overwhelmed with certainty- she would die. She saw movement from somewhere on her left someone running into the road- and realized; a second later; that Ray had swerved to avoid it; had jerked his wheel to the left and was plunging straight into the woods.

There was a shuddering crash as she sailed past him; flames licking her windshield. She was screaming. She knew she had to get out of the car now before she hit anything. Skidding; shuddering; spinning in circles; the car was slowing; it

was wandering toward the woods. Maggie fought to open the door.

The handle caught and she thought she would be trapped there as the fire consumed her. Then she thrusts with her shoulder and the door popped open and she jumped; rolled; felt the bite of asphalt on her arm and shoulder. she tasted all the dirt and grit that would fit in her mouth; heard a distant roar of sound as if individuals were yelling her name.

Sparks fell from the wheels of the car as it flipped off the road and into the woods. There was an explosion so loud; she felt it through her whole body. She covered

her head. Now she could hear that people were calling her name-and Ray's; too.

A siren wailed in the distance, for a second or so-o; she thought she must be dead. But she could taste blood in her mouth. If she were dead; she wouldn't be able to taste any blood.

She looked up. The car was in ruins; a pillar of flame was eating it; turning it to rubber and metal. Amazingly; she managed to sit up, and then to stand. She felt no pain as if she were watching a movie about her own life.

-And-

Now she couldn’t hear anything… Nothing- not the voices calling to her; urging her out of the road; away from the car-not the sirens; either. She was in a watery, deep place of silence. She turned and saw Ray struggling to get out of his car. There was blood trickling down his face; three people were trying to pull him from the wreck.

When he’d swerved; he’d gone straight into a tree; the hood was crumpled; compressed nearly in half.

And now she saw why…

Standing in the middle of the road; perfectly still; not twenty feet away; was the tiger.

It was watching Maggie with those deep black eyes; eyes that were old and sorrowful; eyes that had watched centuries go to dust. And at that moment; she felt a jolt go through her, and she knew that the tiger was afraid of the noise and the fire and the people shouting; crowding the road on both sides. But she; Maggie; wasn’t afraid anymore.

She was compelled forward by a force she couldn’t explain. She felt nothing but pity and understanding. She was alone

with the tiger on the road. And in the final moment of the game; as smoke billowed in swollen plumes into the air and fire licked the sky; Maggie Nill walked without hesitation to the tiger, and placed her hand gently on its head, and won.

Part- 4

SATURDAY;

OCTOBER 8

Maggie;

IN EARLY OCTOBER; CACE ENJOYED A WEEK OF FALSE summer. It was warm and bright and; if it weren’t for the trees that had already changed-deep

reds and oranges interspersed with the deep green of the pines-it might have been the beginning of summer. One day; Maggie woke up with a sudden; strong impulse to return to where the game had begun. A mist rose slowly over Cace; shimmering; dispersing finally in the mounting sun; the air smelled like the moist ground and Shaggy cut grass.

'How'd you like to go swimming; Bill?' she asked Lily when Lily rolled over; blinking; hair scattered across the pillow. Maggie could see the light pattern of freckles on Lily's nose; individual lashes highlighted by the sun and thought her sister had never looked so pretty.

‘With Joh- John; too?’ Lily asked. Maggie couldn’t stop herself from smiling. ‘With Joh- John; too.’ He had been driving home every weekend from college; to fulfill his community service duties. And to see Maggie. In the end; she decided to invite Nat and Marcel; too. It seemed right; somehow.

When the small yellow envelope containing a single gold key- the key to a strongbox at a local bank- had arrived mysteriously in the mail; she had collected and divided the money among the three of them.

She knew Marcel had given most of his portion to Kelly Bill; they were building a small memorial for Little Kelly at the site of the Grayed House; which had been demolished.

Nat was taking some acting classes in Albany, and she'd gotten a job modeling clothes on weekends at the Happy Valley Mall. And starting in January; Maggie would enroll in the Jackson Community College's program in veterinary services.

Maggie packed the trunk with a blanket; beach towels.

Mosquito repellent, and sunscreen; a stack of old, waterlogged magazines from Anne’s living room.

A cooler full of iced tea; several bags of large bags of lays potato chips, and creaky beach chairs with faded; striped seats.

She could sense that tomorrow the weather would turn again, and the air would be edged with cold.

Soon Krista would get out of her thirty-day program, and then Maggie and Lily might have to return to Shady Pines; at least temporarily. And soon the months of rain would come.

But today was perfect...

They arrived at the estuary just before lunch. Nobody had spoken much in the car. Lily had squeezed in between Marcel and Nat in the backseat.

Nat braided a portion of Lily's hair and whispered to her about which movie stars she thought were the cutest; Marcel had leaned his head back against the window.

And it was only from the occasional way his mouth twitched into a smile that Maggie knew he wasn't asleep. Joh- John kept one hand on Maggie's knee as she drove; It still seemed miraculous to

see it there. To know that he was hers as he always had been; in some way. But everything was different now.

Different and better. Once out of the car; all their restraint lifted. Lily went whooping into the woods, holding her towel over her head so it flapped behind her like a banner. Nat chased after her... swatting away the branches in her path; Marcel and Joh- John helped Maggie clear out the trunk, and together they all went pushing through the woods; loaded down with towels and beach chairs and the cooler clinking ice.

The beach looked cleaner than usual. Two trash cans had been installed at the far end of the shore.

And the sand-and-gravel strip of beach was free of the usual cigarette butts and beer cans; Sunlight filtering through the trees patterned the water in crazy colors- purples and greens and vivid blues.

Even the steep face of the rock wall across the water; from which all the players had jumped; now looked beautiful instead of frightening- flowers were growing out of fissures in the rock.

Then Maggie noticed; tangled vines sweeping down toward the water.

The trees at the top of the jumping point were fire-red already; burning in the sun.

Lily trotted back to Maggie as she was shaking out the blanket. There was a light breeze, and Maggie had to tamp down the corners with different belongings- her flip-flops; Joh- John's sunglasses; the beach bag.

'Is that it; Maggie?' Lily pointed.

'Is that where you jumped?'

'Nat jumped too;' Maggie said.

'We all did. Well; except Joh-John.'

‘What can I say?’ He was already unlacing his Converses. He winked at

Lily. ‘I’m chicken.’

Briefly; his eyes met Maggie’s. After all this time; she still couldn’t quite believe that he had planned fear, or forgive him for not having told her.

She would never have guessed in a million years- her Joh- John; her best friend; the boy who used to dare her to eat her scabs and then almost throw up when she did.

However, that was the point. He was the same, and different. And that made

her hopeful in a way. If people changed; it meant that she was allowed to change too. She could be different.

She could be happier. Maggie would be happier-being happier already.

‘It isn’t that high;’ Lily said. She squinted. ‘How’d you get up there?’

‘Climbed;’ Maggie said. Lily opened her mouth soundlessly.

‘Come on; Lily!’ Nat was standing by the water; shimmying out of her shorts. Marcel stood a short distance away; smiling out over the river, watching her. ‘Race you into the water!’

‘No fair!’ Lily ran; kicking up sand; struggling out of her T-shirt at the same time.

Maggie and Joh- John lay down on the blanket together; on their backs.

She rested her head on his chest; every- so- often; he ran his fingers lightly through her hair. For a while; they didn’t speak.

They didn’t need to. Maggie knew that no matter what; he would always be hers, and they would always have this- a perfect day; a reprieve from the cold.

Maggie had started to drift off to sleep when Joh- John stirred. ‘I love you; Maggie.’ She opened her eyes. She was warm and lazy. ‘I love you; too;’ she said. The words came with no trouble at all.

...He had just kissed her-once; lightly; on the top of her head, and then; when she tilted her face to his; harder; on the lips-when Lily began to shout.

‘Maggie! Maggie! Look at me!

Maggie!’

Lily was standing at the very top of the rocks. Maggie hadn’t seen her climbing; she must have been quick.

Maggie felt a pulse of fear…

‘Get down!’ She called out.

‘She’s fine;’ Marcel said. He was now standing in the water with Nat-Maggie couldn’t believe Nat had managed to convince him to swim; or that he even owned a bathing suit.

One arm was wrapped around Nat’s waist. They looked amazing together; like statues carved from different colored rocks.

‘Watch me!’ Lily crowd, ‘I’m going to jump!’ She did; without hesitating; Lily threw herself into the air. For a second she

seemed to be suspended there; legs and arms splayed; mouth open and laughing.

Then she was hitting the water and surfacing; spitting out a mouthful of water; calling; ‘Did you see...? I wasn’t scared. Not at all...’ Then at that moment at that time, this feeling of joy flooded Maggie's body and heart- made her feel light and dizzy.

She was on her feet and plunging into the water before Lily could reach the shore; splashing past Nat; who shrieked; tackling her sister as she tried to stand up and dragging her back into the water.

‘You weren’t scared; huh?’

Maggie attacked Lily's bare stomach as Lily wriggled away from her; squealing with laughter; calling for Joh-John's help.

'Are you scared of being tickled; huh?

Are you...?'

'Joh- John; help me!' Lily screamed as Maggie wrapped her in a bear hug.

She pauses... 'Look; you still have time; okay? I just don't want you to wait too long and have all the good placements go to other people. I'm just worried about

you. But everything's fine; you're still okay.'

'You can't get rid of me that easily;' Joh- John said. He kept his arms around her waist. His eyes were the same blue-green as the water. Her Joh- John, her best friend.

'Children; children; don't fight;' Nat said; teasing.

The wind lifted goosebumps on- Maggie's skin; but the sun was warm. She knew that this day; this feeling; couldn't last forever. Everything passed; that was partly why it was so beautiful.

Things would get difficult again. But that was okay too. The bravery was in moving forward; no matter what. Someday; she might be called on to jump again. And she would do it.

She knew; now; that there was always light-beyond the dark, and the fear; out of the depths; there was the sun to reach for, and air and space and freedom. There was always a way up, and out, and no need to be afraid.

~*~

I've always been shy, and afraid that I'll say or do the wrong thing. Hanna is the opposite.

But… um- lately; it’s been more than that.

She’s stopped caring about school altogether; for one thing and has been called to the principal’s office many times for talking back to the teachers.

And sometimes in the middle of talking, she’ll stop; just shut her mouth as though she’s run up against a barrier. Other times I’ll catch her staring out at the ocean as though she’s thinking of swimming away.

Looking at her now; at her clear gray eyes and her mouth as thin and taut as a bowstring; I feel a tug of fear. I think

of my mother floundering for a second in the air before dropping like a stone into the ocean; I think about the face of the girl who dropped from the laboratory roof all those years ago; her cheek turned against the pavement. I will give away thoughts of the illness. Hanna isn't sick.

She can't be. I would know. 'If they want us to be happy; they'd let us pick ourselves;' Hanna grumbles.

'Hanna;' I say sharply. Criticizing the system is the worst offense there is.

'Take it back...'

She holds up her hands... ‘All right; all right. I'll take it back.’

‘You know it doesn’t work. Look how it was in the old days. Chaos all the time; fighting, and war. People were miserable.’

‘I said; I'll take it back.’ She smiles at me, but I’m still mad and I look away.

‘Besides;’ I go on; ‘they do give us a choice.’

Usually; the evaluators generate a list of four or five approved matches, and you are allowed to pick among them.

This way; everyone is happy. In all the years that the procedure has been administered and the marriages arranged; there have been fewer than a dozen divorces in Maine; less than a thousand in the entire United States- and in almost all those cases; either the husband or wife was suspected of being a sympathizer and divorce was necessary and approved by the state.

‘A limited choice;’ she corrects me. ‘We get to choose from the people who have been chosen for us.’

‘Every choice is limited;’ I snap.

(‘That’s life...’)

She opens her mouth as though she's going to respond, but instead she just starts to laugh. Then she reaches down and squeezes my hand; two quick pumps and then two long ones. It's our old sign; a habit we developed in the second grade when one of us was scared or upset; a way of saying; I'm here; don't worry.

'Okay; okay. Don't get defensive. I love the evaluations; okay? Long live-Evaluation Day.'

'That's better;' I say, but I'm still feeling anxious and annoyed. The line shuffles slowly forward, we pass the iron gates; with their complicated crown of

barbed wire, and enter the long driveway that leads to the various lab complexes. We are headed for Building.

The boys go in, and the lines begin to curve away from each other. As we move closer to the front of the line; we get a blast of air-conditioning every time the glass doors slide open and then hum shut.

It feels amazing; like being momentarily dipped head to toe in a thin sheet of ice; popsicle-style, and I turn around and lift my ponytail away from my neck; wishing it weren't so damn hot.

We don’t have air-conditioning at home; just tall, gawky fans that are always sputtering out in the middle of the night. And most of the time- Carol won’t even let us use those; they suck up too much electricity; she says, and we don’t have any to spare. At last; there were only a few people in front of us. A nurse comes out of the building; carrying a stack of clipboards and a handful of pens, and begins distributing them along the line.

‘Please make sure to fill out all required information;’ she says; ‘including your medical and family history.’

My heart begins to work its way up into my throat. The neatly numbered boxes on the page -Last Name; First Name; Middle Initial; Current Address; Age- collapse together. I'm glad Hanna is in front of me.

She begins filling out the forms quickly; resting the clipboard on her forearm; her pen skating over the paper. 'Next.'

The doors whoosh opens again, and a second nurse appears, and gestures for Hanna to come inside with me. In the dark coolness of her; I can see a bright

white waiting room with a green Cachet; she is standing over me.

‘Good luck;’ I say to Hanna.

She turns and gives me a quick smile.

But I can tell she is nervous; finally. There is a fine crease between her eyebrows, and she is chewing on the corner of her lip. She starts to enter the lab and then turns abruptly and walks back to me; her face wild and unfamiliar-looking; grabbing me by both shoulders; putting her mouth directly to my ear. I’m so startled I dropped my clipboard.

‘You know you can’t be happy unless you’re unhappy sometimes; right?’ she whispers, and her voice is hoarse; as though she’s just been crying. ‘What?’ Her nails are -Digging into my shoulders, and at that moment I’m terrified of her.

‘You can’t be really happy unless you’re unhappy sometimes. You know that is; right?’

Before I can respond she releases me, and as she pulls away; her face is as serene and beautiful and composed as ever. She bends down to scoop up my clipboard; which she passes to me; smiling. Then she turns around and is gone behind

the glass doors; which open and close behind her as smoothly as the surface of the water; sucking closed over something that is sinking.

The devil stole into the Garden of Eden. He carried with him the disease- Amor deliria Nervosa- in the form of a seed. It grew and flowered into a magnificent apple tree; which bore apples as bright as blood.

-From Genesis- A Complete History of the World and the Known Universe; by Steven Horace; Ph.D.; Harvard University By the time the nurse admits me into the waiting room; Hanna is

gone-vanished down one of the antiseptic white hallways and whisked behind one of the dozens of identical white doors- although there is about a half-dozen; other girls; milling around; waiting. One girl is sitting in a chair; hunched over her clipboard; scribbling and crossing out her answers, and then re-scrubbing. Another girl is frantically asking a nurse about the difference between ‘chronic medical conditions,’ and ‘pre-existing medical conditions.’ She looks like she’s on the verge of having some kind of fit- a vein is standing out on her forehead and her voice is rising hysterically-and I wonder whether

she’s going to list a tendency toward excessive anxiety on her sheet.

It’s not funny, but I feel like laughing. I bring my hand to my face; snorting into my palm. I tend to get giggly when I’m extremely nervous. During tests at school; I’m always getting in trouble for laughing. I wonder if I should have marked that down.

A nurse takes my clipboard from me and flips through the pages; checking to see that; I haven’t left any answers blank.

‘Lena Haloway?’ She says in the bright; clipped voice that all nurses seem

to share like it's part of their medical training.

'Uh-huh;' I say, and then quickly correct myself. My aunt has told me that the evaluators will expect a certain degree of formality. 'Yes. That's me.'

It's still strange to hear my real name; Holloway and a dull feeling settle at the bottom of my stomach. For the past decade; I've gone by my aunt's name;

Tiddle. Even though it's a pretty stupid last name- Hanna once said it reminded her of a little kid word for peeing-at least it isn't associated with my mother and father. At least the Tiddles is a

real family. The Haloway's are nothing but a memory. But for official purposes; I have to use my birth name.

'Follow me.' The nurse gestures down one of the hallways, and I follow the neat tick-tock of her heels down the linoleum. The halls are blindingly bright. The butterflies are working their way up from my stomach into my head; making me feel dizzy, and I try to calm myself by imagining the ocean outside; its ragged breathing; the seagulls turning pinwheels in the sky.

It will be over soon; I tell myself. It will be over soon and then you'll go

home, and you'll never have to think about the evaluation again.

The hallway seems to go on forever. Up ahead a door opens and shuts, and a moment later; as we turn a corner; a girl brushes past us. Her face is red, and she's been crying. She must be done with her evaluation already. I recognize her; vaguely; as one of the first girls admitted.

I can't help but feel sorry for her. Evaluations typically last anywhere from half an hour to two hours; but it's common wisdom that the longer the evaluators keep you; the better you're doing. Of course; that isn't always true. Two years ago-

Marcy Davies was famously in and out of the lab in forty-five minutes, and she scored a perfect ten. And last year Corey Wine scored a record for longest evaluation -three and a half hours and still received only a three. There's a system behind the evaluations; obviously; but there's always a degree of randomness to them too.

Sometimes; it seems the whole process is designed to be as intimidating and confusing as possible. I have a sudden fantasy of running through these clean, sterile hallways; kicking in all the doors. Then; immediately; I feel guilty. This is the worst of all possible times to be having

doubts about the evaluations, and I mentally curse Hanna. This is her fault; for saying those things to me outside.

You can’t be happy unless you’re unhappy sometimes. A limited choice. We get to choose from the people who have been chosen for us.

I’m glad the choice was made for us. I’m glad I don’t have to choose-but more than that; I’m glad I don’t have to make someone else choose me. It would be okay for Hanna; of course; if things were still the way they were in the old days.

Hanna; with her golden; halo hair, and bright gray eyes, and perfectly straight

teeth, and the laugh that makes everyone in a two-mile radius whip around and looks at her and laughs too.

Even clumsiness looks good on Hanna; it makes you want to reach out a hand to help her or scoop up her books. When I trip over my own feet or spill coffee down the front of my shirt; people look away. You can almost see them thinking; What a mess... And whenever I'm around strangers my mind goes fuzzy and damp and gray; like streets starting to thaw after a hard snow-unlike Hanna; who always knows just what to say. No guy in his right mind would ever choose me when there are people like Hanna in the world- It would be

like settling for a stale cookie when what you want is a big bowl of ice cream; whipped cream, and cherries, and chocolate sprinkles included.

So, I'll be happy to receive my neat; printed sheet of 'Approved Matches.' At least it means I'll end up with somebody. It won't matter if nobody ever thinks I'm pretty (although sometimes I wish; just for a second; that somebody would.) It wouldn't matter if I had one eye.

'In here.' The nurse stops; finally; outside a door that looks identical to all the others. 'You can leave your clothing and things in the antechamber. Please put on

the gown that is provided for you; with the opening to the back. Feel free to take a moment; have some water; do some meditation.' I imagine hundreds and hundreds of girls sitting cross-legged on the floor; hands cupped on their knees; chanting om, and having to stifle another wild urge to laugh.

'Please be aware; however; that the longer you take to prepare; the less time your evaluators will have to get to know you.'

She smiles tightly. Everything about her is tight- her skin; her eyes; her lab coat. She is looking straight at me; but

I have the impression that she isn't focusing; that in her mind she's already tick-tocking her way back to the waiting room; ready to bring yet another girl down yet another hallway, and give her this same spiel. I feel very lonely; surrounded by these thick walls that muffle all sounds; insulated from the sun and the wind and the heat; all of it perfect and unnatural.

'When you're ready; go on through the blue door. The evaluators will be waiting for you in the lab.' After the nurse clicks away; I go into the antechamber; which is small and just as bright as the hallway. It looks like a regular doctor's examination room.

There’s an enormous piece of medical equipment squatting in the corner; emitting a series of periodic beeps; a tissue-paper-covered examination table; a stinging, antiseptic smell. I take off my clothes; shivering as the air-conditioning makes goosebumps pop up all over my skin; the fuzz on my arms standing up a little straighter. Great. Now the evaluators will think I’m a hairy beast. I fold- my clothes; including my bra; in a neat pile and slip on the gown. It’s made of super-sheer plastic, and as I wrap it around my body; securing it at the waist with a knot; I’m fully aware that you can still see pretty

much everything-including the outline of my underwear through its fabric.

Over. Soon it will be over. I take a deep breath and step through the blue door.

It’s even brighter in the lab-dazzlingly bright; so, the evaluators’ first impression of me must be of someone squinting; stepping backward; bringing her hand to her face. Four shadows float in a canoe in front of me. Then my eyes adjust, and the vision resolves into the four evaluators; all sitting behind a long, low table. This room is very large and empty except for the evaluators and; in the

corner; a steel surgical table that's been shoved up against one wall.

Dual rows of overhead lights beat down on me, and I notice how high the ceiling is- at least thirty feet. I have a desperate urge to cross my arms over my chest; to cover myself up somehow. My mouth goes dry and my mind goes as hot and blank and white as the lights. I can't remember what I'm supposed to do; what I'm supposed to say.

Fortunately; one of the evaluators; a woman; speaks first. 'Do you have your forms?' Her voice sounds friendly, but it

doesn’t help the fist that has closed deep in my stomach; squeezing my intestines.

Oh; God; I think; I’m going to pee; I’m going to pee right here. I try to imagine what Hanna will say after this is over when we’re walking through the afternoon sunshine; with the smell of salt and sun-warmed pavement heavy on the air around us. ‘God;’ she’ll say. ‘That was a waste of time. All of them are just sitting there staring like four frogs on a log.’

‘Um-yes.’ I step closer; feeling like the air has turned solid; resisting me.

When I’m a few feet away from the table; I reach out and pass the

evaluators my clipboard. There are three men and one woman, but I find I can't focus on their features for too long. I scan them quickly and then shuffle backward again, getting only an impression of some noses; a few dark eyes; the winking of a pair of glasses.

My clipboard bobs its way down the line of evaluators. I squeeze my arms to my sides and try to appear relaxed. Behind me; an observation deck runs along the back wall; elevated about twenty feet off the ground. It is accessed through a small red door high up beyond the tiered rows of white seats that are meant to hold students; doctors; interns, and junior

scientists. Not only do the lab scientists perform the procedure; but they also do checkups afterward and often treat difficult cases of other diseases.

It occurs to me that the scientists must perform the cure here; in this very room. That must be what the surgical table is for. The fist of anxiety starts closing in my stomach again. For some reason; though I've often thought about what it would be like to be cured; I've never really thought about the procedure itself- the hard metal table; the lights winking above me; the tubes and the wires and the pain.

'Lena Haloway?'

‘Yes. That’s me.’ ‘Okay. Why don’t you start by telling us a little about yourself?’ The evaluator with the glasses leans forward; spreading his hands, and smiles. He has big; square white teeth that remind me of bathroom tiles. The reflection in his glasses makes it impossible to see his eyes, and I wish he would take them off.

‘Talk to us about the things you like to do. Your interests; hobbies; favorite subjects.’

I launch into the speech I’ve prepared; about photography and running and spending time with my friends; but I’m not focusing. I see the evaluators nodding

in front of me, and smiles beginning to loosen their faces as they take notes; so I know I’m doing fine, but I can’t even hear the words that are coming out of my mouth. I’m fixated on the metal surgical table and keep sneaking looks at it from the corner of my eye; watching it blink and shimmer in the light like the edge of a blade.

And suddenly I’m thinking of my mother. My mother had remained uncured despite three separate procedures, and the disease had claimed her; nipped at her insides and turned her eyes hollow and her cheeks pale; had taken control of her feet and led her; inch by inch; to the edge of a

sandy cliff and into the bright; thin air of the plunge beyond.

Or so they tell me. I was six at the time. I remember only the hot pressure of her fingers on my face in the nighttime and her last whispered words to me. I love you. Remember. They cannot take it- they can't take much more.

I close my eyes quickly; overwhelmed by the thought of my mother; writing and a dozen scientists in lab coats watching; scribbling impassively on notepads. Three separate times she was strapped to a metal table; three separate times a crowd of observers watched her

from the deck; took note of her responses as the needles, and then the lasers; pierced her skin. Normally patients are anesthetized during the procedure and don't feel a thing, but my aunt had once let slip that during my mother's third procedure they had refused to sedate her, thinking that the anesthesia might be interfering with- amidst her brain's response to the cure.

'Would you like some water?' Evaluator One; the woman; gestures to a bottle of water and glass set up on the table. She has noticed my momentary flinch, but it's okay. My statement is done, and I can tell by the way the evaluators are

looking at me- pleased; proud like I'm a little kid who has managed to fit all the right pegs in all the right holes that I've done a good job.

I pour myself a glass of water and take a few sips; grateful for the pause. I can feel sweat pricking up under my arms; on my scalp, and at the base of my neck, and I pray to God they can't see it. I try to keep my eyes locked on the evaluators, but there it is in my peripheral vision; grinning at me- that damn table.

'Okay now; Lena. We're going to ask you some questions. We want you to

answer honestly. Remember; we're trying to get to know you as a person.'

As opposed to what? The question pops into my mind before I can stop it.

As an animal?

I take a deep breath; force myself to nod and smile. 'Great.' 'What are some of your favorite books?'

'Love; War, and Interference; by Christopher Malley;' I answer automatically. 'Border; by Philippa Harolde.' It's no use trying to keep the images away- They are rising now; a flood. That one word keeps scripting itself on my

brain; as though it is being seared there. Pain. They wanted to make my mother submit to a fourth procedure. They were coming for her on the night she died; coming to bring her to the labs.

But instead; she had fled into the dark; winged her way into the air. Instead; she had woken me with those words- I love you. Remember…? They cannot take it. The wind seemed to carry back to me long after she had vanished; repeated on the dry trees; on the leaves coughing and whispering in the cold gray dawn.

‘And Romeo and Juliet; by Krumenacker Shakespeare.’

Romeo and Juliet are required to read in every freshman-year health class. The evaluator's nod; make notes.

‘And why is that?’ Evaluator Three asks.

It’s frightening- That’s what I’m supposed to say. It’s a cautionary tale; a warning about the dangers of the old world; before the cure.

But my throat seems to have grown swollen and tender. There is no room to squeeze the words out; they are stuck there like the burrs that cling to our clothing when we jog through the farms.

And at that moment; it's like I can hear the low growl of the ocean; can hear its distant; insistent murmur; can imagine its weight closing around my mother; water as heavy as stone. And what comes out is-

'It's beautiful...'

Instantly all four faces jerk up to look at me; like puppets connected to the same string.

'Beautiful...?' Evaluator One wrinkles her nose. There's a zinging; frigid tension in the air, and I realize I've made a big, big mistake. The evaluator with the glasses leans forward. 'That's an interesting word to use. Very interesting.'

This time when he shows his teeth; they remind me of the curved white canines of a dog. ‘Perhaps you find suffering beautifully? Perhaps you enjoy violence?’

‘No. No; that’s not it.’ I’m trying to think straight, but my head is full of the ocean’s wordless roaring. It is growing louder and louder by the second. And now; faintly; it’s as though I can hear screaming as well-like my mother’s scream is reaching me from across the span of a decade. ‘I just mean - there’s something so sad about it.’

I’m struggling; floundering; feeling like I’m drowning now; in the white

light and the roaring. Sacrifice. I want to say something about sacrifice, but the word doesn't come.

~*~

'Let's move on.' Evaluator One; who sounded so sweet when she offered me the water; has lost all pretense of friendliness. She is all business now.

'Tell us something simple. Like your favorite color; for example.' Part of my brain-the rational; the educated part; the logical me part- screams; Blue! Say blue! But this other; older thing inside of me is riding across the waves of sound;

surging up with the rising noise. ‘Gray;’ I blurted out.

‘Gray?’ Evaluator Four splutters back. My heart is spiraling down to my stomach. I know I’ve done it; I’m tanking; I can practically see my numbers flipping backward. But it’s too late. I’m finished-it’s the roaring in my ears; growing louder and louder; a stampede; that makes thinking impossible. I quickly stammered out an explanation.

‘Not gray; exactly... Right before the sun rises there’s a moment when the whole sky goes this pale, nothing color-not really gray but sort of; or sort of white, and

I’ve always really liked it because it reminds me of waiting for something good to happen.’

But they’ve stopped listening. All of them are staring beyond me; heads cocked; expressions confused; as though trying to make out familiar words in a foreign language. And then suddenly the roaring and the screaming surge and I realize, I haven’t been imagining them all this time.

People are screaming, and there’s a tumbling; rolling; drumming sound; like a thousand feet moving together. There’s a third sound too; running under both of

those- a wordless bellowing that doesn’t sound human.

In my confusion; everything seems disconnected; the way it does in dreams. Evaluator One half rises from her chair; saying; ‘What the hell -?’ At the same time; Glasses says; ‘Sit down; Helen. I’ll go see what’s wrong.’ But at that second the blue door bursts open and a streaming blur of cows- actual; real; live; sweating; mooing cows-come thundering into the lab. A stampede; I think, and for one weird; the detached second I feel proud of myself for correctly identifying the noise.

Then I realize I’m being charged by a bunch of very heavy; very frightened herd animals, and am about two seconds from getting stomped into the ground. Instantly I launch myself into the corner and wedge myself behind the surgical table; where I’m completely protected from the panicked mass of animals. I poke my head out just a little; so, I can still see what’s going on.

The evaluators are hopping up onto the table now; as walls of brown and speckled cow flanks fold around them. Evaluator One is screaming at the top of her lungs, and Glasses is yelling; ‘Calm down; calm down!’ even though he’s

grabbing onto her like she's a life raft and he's in danger of sinking. Some of the cows have wigs hanging crazily from their heads, and others are half-swaddled in gowns identical to the one I'm wearing.

For a second I'm sure I'm dreaming. Maybe this whole day has been a dream, and I'll wake up to discover that I'm still at home; in bed; on the morning of my evaluation. But then I notice the writing on the cows' flanks- NOT CURE- DEATH.

The words are written in sloppy ink; just above the neatly branded numbers that identify these cows as destined for the slaughterhouse.

A little chill dances up my spine and everything starts clicking into place. Every couple of years the Invalids-the people who live in the Wilds; the unregulated land that exists between recognized cities and towns-sneak into

Pittsburgh and stage some kind of protest.

One year they came in at night and painted red death skulls on every single one of the known scientists' houses. Another year they managed to break into the central police station; which coordinates all the patrols and guard shifts for Pittsburgh and move all the furniture

onto the roof; even the coffee machines. That was pretty funny; actually-and pretty amazing since you'd think Central would be the most secure building in Pittsburgh. People in the Wilds don't see love as a disease, and they don't believe in the cure. They think it's a kind of cruelty. Thus; the slogan.

Now I get it- The cows are dressed up like us; the people being evaluated. Like we're all a bunch of herd animals.

The cows are calming down somewhat. They're not charging anymore, and have begun to shuffle back and forth in

the lab. Evaluator One has a clipboard in her hand, and she’s swooping and swatting as the cow's butt up against the table; mooing and nipping at the papers scattered across its surface -the evaluators’ notes; I realize; as a cow snaps up a sheet of paper and begins to rip at it with its teeth.

Thank God- Maybe the cows will eat up all the notes, and the evaluators will lose track of the fact that I was completely tanking. Half-concealed behind the table- and safe; now; from those sharp; stamping hooves- I have to admit the whole thing is kind of hilarious.

That’s when I hear it. Somehow; above the snorting and stomping and yelling; I hear the laugh above me-low and short and musical; like someone sounding out a few notes on a piano. The observation decks. A boy is standing on the observation deck; watching the chaos below. And he’s laughing.

As soon as I look up; his eyes click on my face. The breath whooshes out of my body and everything freezes for a second; as though I’m looking at him through my camera lens; zoomed in all the way; the world pausing for that tiny period between the opening and closing of the shutter. His hair is golden brown; like leaves in autumn

just as they're turning, and he has bright amber eyes.

The moment I see him- I know that he's one of the people responsible for this. I know that he must live in the Wilds; I know he's an Invalid.

Fear clamps down on my stomach, and I open my mouth to shout something- I'm not sure what; exactly-but at precisely that second he gives a minute shake of his head, and suddenly I can't make a sound. Then he does the absolutely; positively unthinkable.

He winks at me...

At last; the alarm goes off. It’s so loud I have to cover my ears with my hands. I look down to see whether the evaluators have seen him, but they’re still doing their little tabletop dance, and when I look up again; he’s gone.

Step on a crack; you’ll break your mama’s back.

Step on a stone; you’ll end up all alone.

Step on a stick; you’re bound to get Sick. Watch where you tread; you’ll bring out all the dead.

-A common children’s playground chant; usually accompanied by jumping rope or clapping… That night; I had the dream again.

I’m at the edge of a big white cliff made out of the sand. The ground is unsteady. The ledge I’m standing on is starting to crumble; to flake away and tumble down; down; down thousands of feet below me; into the ocean; which is whipping and snapping so hard it looks like one gigantic; frothing stew; all Whitecaps, and surging water.

I’m terrified I’m going to fall, but for some reason, I can’t move or back away

from the edge of the cliff; even as I feel the ground shifting away from underneath me; millions of molecules rearranging themselves into space; into the wind- Any second I’m going to fall.

Likewise, just before, I know that there’s nothing underneath me but air-that at any split second I’m going to feel the wind shrieking around me as I drop down into the water-the waves lashing underneath me open up for a moment, and- I see my mother’s face; pale and bloated and splotched with blue; floating just below the surface. Her eyes are open; her mouth is split apart as though she is screaming; her arms are extended on either side of

her; bobbing in the current; as though she is waiting to embrace me.

That’s when I wake up. That’s when I always wake up.

My pillow is damp, and I’ve got a scratchy feeling in my throat. I’ve been crying in my sleep. Gracie is folded next to me; one cheek squashed flat against the sheets; her mouth making endless; noiseless repetitions. She always gets into bed with me when I’m having a dream.

She can sense it; somehow. I brush her hair away from her face and pull the sweat-soaked sheets away from her

shoulders. I'll be sorry to leave Grace when I move out.

Our secrets have made us close; bonded us together. She is the only one who knows of the Coldness- a feeling that comes sometimes when I'm lying in bed; a black; the empty feeling that knocks my breath away and leaves me gasping as though I've just been thrown in the icy water.

On nights like that though; it is wrong and illegal- I think of those strange and terrible words; I love you and wonder what they would taste like in my mouth; try

to recall their lilting rhythm on my mother's tongue.

And of course; I keep her secret safe. I'm the only one who knows that Grace isn't stupid, or slow- There's nothing wrong with her at all. I'm the only one who has ever heard her speak.

One night after she'd come to sleep in my bed I woke up in the very early morning; the nighttime shadows ebbing off our walls. She was sobbing quietly into the pillow next to me; pronouncing the same word over and over; stuffing her mouth with blankets so I could barely hear her- 'Mommy; Mommy; Mommy.'

As though she was trying to chew her way around it; as though it was choking her in her sleep. I'd put my arms around her and squeezed, and after what felt like hours; she exhausted herself on the word and fell back to sleep; the tension in her body slowly relaxing; her face hot and bloated from the tears.

That's the real reason she doesn't speak. All the rest of her words are crowded out by that single; looming one; a word still echoing in the dark corners of her memory.

Mommy…

I know, I remember. I sit up and watch the light strengthen the walls; listen for the sounds of the seagulls outside; take a drink from the glass of water next to my bed. Today is June 3. Ninety-five days.

I wish; for Grace; the cure could come sooner. I comfort myself by thinking that someday she will have the procedure too. Someday she will be saved, and the past and all its pain will be rendered as smoothly palatable as the food we spoon to our babies.

Someday we'll all be saved. By the time I drag myself down to breakfast- feeling as though someone is grinding sand

into both of my eyes-the official story about the incident at the labs has been released.

Carol keeps our small TV on low while she makes breakfast, and the murmur of the newscasters' voices almost puts me back to sleep.

'Yesterday a truck full of cattle intended for the slaughterhouse was mixed up with a shipment of pharmaceuticals, resulting in the hilarious and unprecedented chaos you see on your screen.' Cue- nurses squealing; swatting at lowing cows with clipboards.

This doesn't make any sense, but as long as no one mentions the Invalids;

everyone’s happy. We’re not supposed to know about them. They're not even supposed to exist; supposedly; all the people who live in the Wilds were destroyed over fifty years ago; during the blitz.

Fifty years ago; the government closed the borders of the United States. The border is guarded constantly by military personnel. No one can get in. No one goes out. Every sanctioned and approved community must also be contained within a border that's the law and all travel between communities requires the official written consent of the municipal government; to be obtained six

months in advance. This is for our protection. Safety; Sanctity; Community- That is our country's motto. For the most part; the government has been successful. We haven't seen a war since the border was closed, and there is hardly any crime, except for the occasional incident of vandalism or petty theft. There is no more hatred in the United States; at least among the cured. Only sporadic cases of detachment-but every medical procedure carry a certain risk.

But so far; the government has failed to rid the country of the Invalids, and it is the single blemish on the administration and the system in general.

So, we don’t talk about them. We pretend that the Wilds-and the people who live there- don’t even exist. It’s rare to hear the word even spoken; except when a suspected sympathizer disappears; or when a young diseased couple is found to have vanished together before a cure can be administered.

One piece of really good news is this-

All of yesterday’s evaluations have been invalidated. All of us will receive a new evaluation date, which means I get a second chance. This time I swear I’m not

going to screw it up. I feel completely idiotic about my meltdown at the labs.

Sitting at the breakfast table; with everything looking so clean and bright and normal-the chipped blue mugs full of coffee; the erratic beeping of the microwave (one of the few electronic devices; besides the lights; Carol allows us to use)-makes yesterday seem like a long, strange dream. It’s a miracle; actually; that a bunch of fanatical Invalids decided to let loose a stampede at the exact moment I was failing the most important test of my life. I don’t know what came over me. I think about Glasses showing his teeth, and the moment I heard my mouth say.

‘Gray;’ and I wince. Stupid; stupid.

Suddenly I’m aware that Jenny has been talking to me.

‘What?’ I blink at Jenny as she swims into focus. I watch her hands as she cuts her toast precisely into quarters.

‘I said; what’s wrong with you?’ Back and forth; back and forth. The knife dings against the edge of the plate. ‘You look like you’re about to puke or something.’ ‘Jenny;’ Carol scolds. She is at the sink; washing dishes. ‘Not while your uncle is eating breakfast.’ ‘I’m fine.’ I rip off a piece of toast; slide it across the stick

of butter that's getting melty in the middle of the table, and force myself to eat. The last thing I need is a good old family-style interrogation. 'Just tired.' Carol turns to look at me. Her face has always reminded me of a doll's. Even when she's talking; even when she's irritated or happy or confused; her expression stays weirdly immobile.

'Couldn't sleep?'

'I slept;' I say. 'I just had a bad dream; that's all.' At the end of the table; my uncle

Krumenacker starts up from his newspaper.

‘Oh; God. You know what? You just reminded me. I had a dream last night too.’

Carol raises her eyebrows, and even Jenny looks interested. It’s extremely unusual for people to dream once they’ve been cured. Carol once told me that on the rare occasions she still dreams; her dreams are full of dishes; stacks and stacks of them climbing toward the sky, and sometimes she climbs them; lip to lip; hauling herself up into the clouds; trying to reach the top of the stack. But it never ends; it stretches on into infinity. As far as I know; my sister Rachel never dreams anymore.

Krumenacker smiles; ‘I was caulking the window in the bathroom. Carol; you remember I said there was a draft the other day? Anyway; I was piping in the caulk, but every time I finished; it would just flake away-almost like it was snow-and the wind would come in and

I’d have to start all over. On and on and on for hours; it felt like.’

‘How strange;’ my aunt says; smiling; coming to the table with a plate of fried eggs. My uncle likes them super runny, and they sit on the plate; their yolks jiggling and quivering like hula-hoop dancers; spotted with oil. My stomach

twists. Krumenacker says; ‘No wonder I’m so tired this morning. I was doing housework all night.’

Everyone laughs but me. I choke down another bit of toast; wondering whether I’ll dream once I’ve been cured.

I hope not.

This year is the first year since sixth grade that I don’t have a single class with Hanna; so, I don’t see her until after school; when we meet up in the locker room to go running; even though the cross-country season ended a couple of weeks ago.

(When the team went to Regionals it was only the third time I'd ever been out of Pittsburgh, and even though we went just forty miles along the gray, bleak municipal highway; I could still hardly swallow; the butterflies in my throat were so frantic.)

Still; Hanna and I try to run together as much as we can; even during school vacations. I started running when I was six years old after my mom committed suicide. The first day I ever ran a whole mile was the day of her funeral. I'd been told to stay upstairs with my cousins while my aunt prepared the house for the memorial service and laid out all the food.

Marcia and Rachel were supposed to get me ready, but in the middle of helping me dress, they'd started arguing about something and had stopped paying me any attention at all. So-o I had wandered downstairs; my dress zipped halfway up my back; to ask my aunt for help. Mrs. Eisner; my aunt's neighbor at the time, was there. As I came into the kitchen she was saying; 'It's horrible; of course. But there was no hope for her anyway. It's much better this way. It's better for Lena; too. Who wants a mother like that?'

I wasn't supposed to have heard. Mrs. Eisner gave a startled little gasp when

she saw me, and her mouth shut quickly; like a cork popping back into a bottle.

My aunt just stood there, and in that second it was as though the world and the future collapsed down into a single point, and I understood that this-the kitchen; the spotless cream linoleum floors; the glaring lights, and the vivid green mass of Jell-O on the counter- was all that was left now that my mother was gone.

Suddenly, I couldn't stay there. I couldn't stand the sight of my aunt's kitchen, which I now understood would be my kitchen. I couldn't stand the Jell-O.

My mother hated Jell-O. An itchy feeling began to work its way through my body; as though a thousand mosquitoes were circulating through my blood; biting me from the inside; making me want to scream; jump; squirm.

I ran…